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Hog Creek Review

## God is a Consuming Fire

*“With today marking the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of LAFF v. Melinski, many are reflecting back on the ruling that, some argue, has made life more dangerous.” The anchor straightened her back as she shuffled papers on her desk for dramatic effect.*

*“Argued as both insanity and logical preventive measures for our current times, today takes us back to the ruling that swayed in favor of the couple who had their main property damaged by firefighters, despite being rescued from the ablaze boathouse located behind the main house. The house suffered “needless, malicious damage” by the well-meaning heroes who axed their way through locked doors, desperate to make it to victims they, at first, could not locate.”*

*“In an effort to prevent situations like this from arising in the future, contracts are written up every 3 years, requiring homeowners’ consent in the case of a structural fire not being readily apparent. While being an inconvenience, most fire chiefs believe the system currently being used is-”*

Bud turned the old television off on his way back to the table, a fresh cup of coffee in a calloused hand. “Enough of that, I think we know the drill better than most anyways. Somebody just deal already.”

The men in the lodge who made up Bakersville volunteer firefighters grunted in various tones of approval. Living in a small township, they were half an hour away from the nearest real station. Any training seminar they attended or anytime they went to touch base with the station, they were lectured like small children who were trying their hardest to impersonate dad. As if they didn’t have the capacity to understand the regulations and precautions that cropped up with the *LAFF v. Melinski* ruling.

Ed and Bud Keller, Dell Fieldman, and a handful of others met at the lodge every Wednesday and Friday night for cards, coffee, and companionship. And despite his insistence to sit out every game, every night, Isaiah Belk always came as well.

Isaiah sat kicked back in a chair in the corner and carving away at small blocks of wood, whittling random shapes. He often produced small, soft edged crosses as well, but made sure to give them all as gifts, lest he collect too many and grow overly attached to them.

*“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image!” Edna Belk had screeched at her nephew, just a boy of seven, bringing home his crayon rendition of Christ from Sunday school, in the vain hope his piece would be put on the refrigerator.*

*“It’s a miracle the Devil hasn’t sent flames up from his throne to lick at you yet, boy! Impudent, disrespectful, heretical boy!”*

Isaiah watched the others gather around the table in preparation for their game. Too many for euchre tonight; they might go straight to poker. A hellish game, by all accounts, and the thunk of the deck hitting the table as Ed shuffled the cards stirred memories of Aunt Edna’s wooden spoon rapping knuckles.

“A’right, winner gets outta the pool for rounding up the contracts next year, how ‘bout that?” Bud suggested, and a round of laughs followed his suggestion. Trying to distribute and collect the fire contracts, hell, you would think they were census takers.

“Don’t wanna insult Isaiah’s delicate sensibilities by stakin’ real money.” Ed sent a goading smirk over to Isaiah’s corner.

Dell’s brow furrowed. Isaiah was a strange one, sure. Devout and quiet, but doubtlessly a good man. It wouldn’t do for Ed to always be trying to stir up an argument with the him, regardless of how impossible it was to egg Isaiah into any sort of conflict. “Ed, didya ever consider if you sat out some games like him you wouldn’t be shakin’ your truck cushions to pay your electric bill every month?”

Isaiah continued his whittling over the guffaws of all the men, wondering if God was telling him that dropping his usual load of extra firewood at Ed’s house for his furnace was a lost cause.

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The call came in the early evening, light still streaming through the modest curtains of Isaiah’s kitchen. He had finished helping his brothers work on their utility tractor less than

an hour previously, and was rightfully thankful that he had the good fortune to be available for the call.

“Isaiah! It’s Bud. Gotta call a few minutes ago about some smoke and commotion at the Hellet house. Figured it’s just another booze soaked ruckus, but they want us to check. Gonna take while for the crew from town to get there. Feel up to checkin’ on the fools before we get there?”

Isaiah nodded solemnly into the receiver. “It will be no problem. I’ll head there now.”

“Great! We’ll meet you there as soon as we can, so-” The muffled crackle of the call was cut short by Isaiah hanging up

It seemed he probably had another lecture about sin and overindulgence to the Hellet boys.

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Despite the plumes of smoke and the acrid smell of the fire, the house itself was perfectly untouched, the gleaming off-white shutters almost mocking through the smog. Perfectly normal, given the boys’ penchant for bonfires. But the smell was off. And the smoke maybe too plentiful.

Isaiah frowned and stalked around the house, curious about the unusual quality of the situation and the far more astounding silence. His jaunt brought him to the spacious bonfire pit, filled with flames more wild than the area should allow. But it was not the flames that caused him suck in a gasp.

There were four discolored mounds, a few half in the flames, and a few close by. And for what little shape could be considered discernable, they were faintly humanoid, and doubtlessly responsible for the repugnant smell that was threaded through the air.

“And fire came down from God out of Heaven, and devoured them,” Isaiah murmured, an eerie calm choking him as he vaguely wondered if Gomorrah had held the same stench.

One of the figures by the flames let out a low moan, its charred fingers grasped at nothingness, legs that gave spasms at random intervals. The signs of life had Isaiah

whispering up a fervent prayer as he dashed to what he assumed was one of the boys he had watched grow up. As he knelt, he began to comfort the smoldering man.

“I know what I’m supposed to say. With the laws as what they are,” he gestured behind him at the pristine house, trying not to focus on the things near his knees having no sights if it held any capacity for anything beyond pain at all, “If it’s not burning, I can’t help you. But don’t worry, I’ll-”

He considered the arrogant folly of the Hellet’s refusal to sign the forms he brought around two years earlier on behalf of the station in town. He thought of their complete absence from the congregation for the past months. And he considered the bottles of various poisons that were spread around what had been a campfire at first. Just the sight of them, all empty none the less, made Isaiah curl up his lip in distaste.

“And whoso falleth not down and worshipping shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.”

Isaiah felt the light of Divine understanding flood his body as he gazed at the grotesque form in front of him. The body’s limbs had stopped their twitching and writhing, the mouth now only working in silent, senseless patterns, perhaps pleading, perhaps spilling gospels from the melted and destroyed lips.

“Cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

The steel-toed boot of Isaiah Belk, firmly planted on the chest of the crumpled being before him, slowly rolled him back into the bonfire’s eager grasp. To God’s grasp.

His own miracle.